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TWELVE

Minjok as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'aeho's Historiography

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"Korea" as a civilization, or as a cultural and social formation, has a history dating back over a thousand years. As the political and religious elite of "Unified" Silla (676–935), Koryŏ (936–1392), and Chosŏn (1392–1910) reacted to and participated in intellectual movements within the larger cosmopolitan world centered around "China," they were compelled to generate various forms of collective identity—representations of their state and their people as separate and unique. Through the practice of state-sponsored rituals, the building of monuments, and the compilation of official histories, narratives about the collective "self" were continuously generated. As such narratives were generated, other (competing) narratives were repressed or contested. That is to say, narratives on "Korean" identity did not simply accumulate over time: not all such narratives got transmitted, and even those that were, were invariably translated (reinvented) for use in the present.¹

It is in this sense that the concept of Koreans as constituting a "nation" (*minjok*) is a modern construct, which, in the historical context of its emergence at the turn of the century, enabled more democratic,

more inclusive forms of political action. The word itself (read *minzoku* in Japanese, *minzu* in Chinese) was a neologism created in Meiji Japan.² In the early 1880s, according to Yasuda Hiroshi, Miyazaki Muryū translated the French Assemblée Nationale as *minzoku kaigi*. But it was only in the 1890s that *minzoku* came to mean the ethnic nation.³ As understanding of the term became more fixed in Japanese political discourse, its meaning approached the German *Volk* or *Volkschaft*.⁴ And, as Andre Schmid pointed out, when intellectuals throughout East Asia appropriated the neologism, *minjok* became not only a powerful political concept but also “a powerful conceptual tool . . . to rewrite [the] historical past.”⁵

This is not to ignore Lydia Liu’s injunction to those engaged in cross-cultural studies to eschew a conceptual model “derived from a bilingual dictionary.”⁶ Although the word “*minjok*” entered the Korean vocabulary in the late 1890s and became widely used two decades later, this is not sufficient proof that the *minjok* is a modern construct. Son Chint’ae (1900–Korean War?) made this point in 1948 when he wrote, “Although the word ‘*minjok*’ was not used in the past—because it was the quintessential character of Korea’s court-centered, aristocratic states to obstruct the development of such [national] consciousness (*sasang*) and concepts—the [Korean] *minjok* certainly did exist even if the word did not.”⁷ Similarly, Cho Tonggöl, in a recent book on historians and historiography in Korea, applauds the pioneer of nationalist historiography, Sin Ch’aeho (1880–1936), not for creating a historical narrative based on a new construct called the *minjok* but for creating a historical narrative based on the *discovery* of the *minjok*—suggesting that prior to its discovery the *minjok* was already (and always) present.⁸ In contrast to these views, I argue in this essay that *minjok* is a modern construct, and not to recognize it as such is to miss the crucial link in early twentieth-century Korean historiography between nationalism and democratic thought.

To understand this linkage, we might begin with the question of when and how peasants of Kyōngsang province, for example, became “Koreans.” Of a very different historical context, Eugen Weber has argued that the French peasant was “nationalized” (that is, made French) only in the 1880s. “The French” were produced in the last decades of the nineteenth century through the creation of a national language (standard French) and national customs. To be more precise, the transformation of peasants into Frenchmen became possible after the establishment of universal schooling, unification of customs and beliefs by

inter-regional labor migration and military service, and subordination of political and religious conflicts to an ideology of patriotism. In other words, it was only after the emergence of modern state structures that distinctive social, political, and linguistic practices became "local variations" of a newly created national culture.⁹

If the French became "French" in the 1880s, when did Koreans become "Koreans"? In asking this question, it must be emphasized that Korea, perhaps as early as the Koryŏ period, had far more linguistic and cultural unity than did pre-Revolutionary France. There were, however, significant linguistic and cultural differences among the various provinces in Korea. Even more important than these regional (lateral) differences, status distinctions between *yangban*, *chungin* (middle people), commoners, and *ch'ŏnmin* (base people) had created horizontal lines of cultural cleavage in which each status group had its own idiom, norms, and social role. It can be argued, for example, that Confucianism "belonged" to the ruling (*yangban*) class in the sense that it served to underscore, legitimize, and make authoritative the different worlds inhabited by the horizontally segregated layers in pre-modern Korean society.¹⁰ As Carter Eckert notes, prior to the late-nineteenth century,

there was little, if any, feeling of loyalty toward the abstract concept of "Korea" as a nation-state, or toward fellow inhabitants of the peninsula as "Koreans." Far more meaningful at the time, in addition to a sense of loyalty to the king, were the attachments of Koreans to their village or region, and above all to their clan, lineage, and immediate and extended family. The Korean elite in particular would have found the idea of nationalism not only strange but also uncivilized. Since at least the seventh century the ruling classes in Korea had thought of themselves in cultural terms less as Koreans than as members of a larger cosmopolitan civilization centered on China. . . . To live outside the realm of Chinese culture was, for the Korean elite, to live as a barbarian.¹¹

Eckert is not suggesting that Korean elites were ignorant of differences (political, linguistic, and cultural) between themselves and, say, the Chinese. For more than a thousand years, Korea had a central bureaucratic state that employed a class of people whose job was to maintain and articulate difference vis-à-vis competing, neighboring states (most often in Manchuria, sometimes Japan, and of course, China itself).¹² However, unlike the modern nation-state, the kingdoms of "Unified" Silla, Koryŏ, and Chosŏn were not interested in "nationalizing" their subjects. In fact, it can be argued that the pre-modern state's (extremely effective) solution to the problem of

maintaining political stability was to tolerate local distinctiveness and to maintain status distinctions.¹³

The people of Chosŏn knew that they shared certain ties with other people living in the Chosŏn kingdom, as well as with ancestors they had never seen. But, as Benedict Anderson would argue, these “ties” would have been imagined particularistically—“as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship.”¹⁴ At the turn of the century, however, a new generation of political activists and intellectuals felt they had to redefine Korea in terms of internal homogeneity and external autonomy. The historical juncture for this epistemological break came after Korea was forcibly incorporated into a nation-state system dominated by Western imperial powers, after the Korean monarchy proved itself incapable of keeping these powers at bay, and after Korean intellectuals were forced to acknowledge the strength of Meiji (Westernizing) Japan. Organizing movements for independence, self-strengthening, and people’s rights, these intellectuals re-imagined Korea’s collective identity in terms of a “deep, horizontal comradeship”—regardless of, or because of, the actual divisions and inequalities that prevailed in Korean society.

Minjok and Historiography

It was ethnic-national historiography (*minjok sahak*), then, born in the early twentieth century, that for the first time narrated the history of Korea as the history of the Korean *minjok*, a category inclusive of every Korean without regard to age, gender, or status distinctions.¹⁵ The first nationalist historian responsible for centering the ethnic nation—both as the subject of history and as the object for historical research—was Sin Ch’aeho.¹⁶ His 1908 essay “Toksa sillon” (A new way of reading history) set forth the first and most influential historical narrative equating Korean history (*kuksa*) with the history of the Korean nation (*minjoksa*). As a history of the ethnic nation, rather than a dynastic history, Sin Ch’aeho traced the origin of the Korean nation to the mythical figure Tan’gun.¹⁷

The Tan’gun legend had an ambiguous place in premodern Korean historiography. It is not mentioned in Korea’s oldest extant history, the *Samguk sagi* (Historical record of the Three Kingdoms) compiled by Kim Pusik in 1145.¹⁸ In a recent book on Korean historiography, Han Yŏngu states that the political intent of Kim Pusik’s *Samguk sagi* was to bolster bureaucratic authority centered around the Koryŏ court

(936–1392)—at the expense of the aristocracy. Compiled ten years after Kim Pusik suppressed a revolt led by Myoch'öng,¹⁹ *Samguk sagi* also makes no reference to Parhae (699–926: P'ohai in Chinese), a kingdom, established by a former Koguryö general, encompassing much of Manchuria, southern Siberia, and northeast Korea.²⁰

In writing the history of the Three Kingdoms (Koguryö: 37 B.C.E.–668 C.E.; Paekche: 18 B.C.E.–660 C.E.; and Silla: 57 B.C.E.–935 C.E.), Kim Pusik depicted Koryö as the successor to Silla (which by 676 had come to control the southern two-thirds of the peninsula). In contrast, the forces led by Myoch'öng had regarded Koryö as the successor state of Koguryö and had advocated an (incautious) expansionist policy to recover onetime Koguryö land.²¹ The suppression of Myoch'öng's revolt went hand in hand with policies of coexisting peacefully with the Chin and bolstering the authority of the Koryö court by promoting Confucian principles, particularly, loyalty to the king. Likewise, the narrative strategy as well as the methodology of Kim Pusik's *Samguk sagi*, including the invocation of the Confucian historiographic principles of rationality (*mujing pulsün*) and fidelity to historical sources (*suli pujak*: that is, transmission without creative elaboration), cannot be understood apart from the political context of mid-twelfth-century Koryö.

The Tan'gun legend does appear in the thirteenth-century texts *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms; 1285?) written by the Buddhist Sön master Iryön, and in *Chewang un'gi* (Rhymed record of emperors and kings; 1287) written by Yi Sünghyu.²² But these histories were compiled under very different historical circumstances. Both began their histories with Tan'gun, a significant assertion that traced Koryö's origin directly to heaven. Because Iryön and Yi Sünghyu witnessed the suffering of the people during the Mongol invasions and its domination of Koryö, Yi Kibaek surmises that this "strengthened their sense of identity as a distinct race (*minjok*) and gave force to the concept of their descent from a common ancestor."²³ Among the events that Iryön and Yi Sünghyu witnessed was King Ch'ungnyöl's marriage to a daughter of Kubilai in 1274, and the Koryö royal family's becoming a cadet branch of the Mongol imperial house.²⁴ The meaning of the Tan'gun legend in these thirteenth-century texts, then, cannot be isolated from the historical context of the Mongol domination of Koryö from 1259 to 1356. Indeed, it is reasonable to interpret Iryön's narrative strategy of making Tan'gun as ancient as the legendary Chinese Emperor Yao, and

his willingness to talk about “extraordinary forces and capricious spirits” and “wondrous tales” (religiously ignoring the Confucian principle of *mujing pulsŏn*), as a narrative of resistance.²⁵

Sin Ch’aeho’s use of the Tan’gun legend in a twentieth-century context was similarly a narrative of resistance, but it was also a re-invention—and not simply a revival—of this old and recurrent narrative in premodern Korean historiography. That is to say, earlier representations of Korea as a social totality in the *Samguk sagi*, *Samguk yusa*, or in the Confucian historiography of the Chosŏn period did not necessarily, or teleologically, develop into the secular and egalitarian imaginary called the “*minjok*.” The best evidence that any “transmission” of the past must also be a re-invention is Sin Ch’aeho’s “Toksa sillon” itself. If Korea as a homogenous ethnic nation had been a well-established, abiding concept, then there would have been no need to write “Toksa sillon,” and it would not have caused such excitement among his readers in 1908.

By identifying the *minjok*, rather than the monarch, as the subject of an evolutionary history (where the strong survive and the weak perish), Sin Ch’aeho’s “Toksa sillon” displaced traditional forms of Confucian historiography—*p’yŏnnyŏnch’e* (chronicles) and *kijŏnch’e* (annal-biographies)—with the (tragic) epic form. Sin Ch’aeho adopted a novel way of telling what Confucian historians had already known; his narrative utilized new codes to produce new structures of meaning quite different from that found in histories written in the chronicle and the annal-biography styles.²⁶

Confucian historiography had constituted itself not as a separate discipline but as part of a larger body of knowledge of statecraft (*kyŏnghak*). Its function was to serve as a mirror and as a repository of knowledge that would enable the monarch and his officials to act morally and ethically in the present. As a pedagogical tool, Confucian histories were used to educate scholar-officials in the art of governing; as a political tool, history writing had the solemn ethical function of assigning praise or blame. Although both official and private histories existed, both were written by bureaucrats for other bureaucrats (either holding office or aspiring to do so).²⁷ Moreover, in terms of access to court documents and official histories (with the exception of the Collected Statutes), these could be consulted only by a small group of scholar-officials.²⁸

Although nationalist historiography constituted itself as a separate discipline (separate from statecraft), it preserved some aspects of Con-

fucian historiography: for example, the concept of history as a mirror for the present, and history as serving an ethical function (assigning praise and blame). But the critical difference had to do with the profound epistemic break caused by Korea's incorporation into the nation-state system dominated by the West in the late nineteenth century, and the social position of the historian and his intended readership in colonial modernity. Few of the nationalist historians came from high *yangban* status, many were regularly hounded by the colonial police, and most wrote their histories in their capacity as "public intellectuals." When Sin Ch'aeho wrote "Toksa sillon," for example, he was a member of the secret society Sinminhoe (New people's association) and employed by the newspaper *Taehan maeil sinbo* (Korean daily news), and the essay itself was serialized in the *Taehan maeil sinbo* from August to December 1908.²⁹

On the eve of being colonized by Japan, to achieve political independence and to reclaim dignity and "authentic" identity in reaction to colonialist discourses on Korea, nationalists such as Sin Ch'aeho sought to arouse, unite, and mobilize the entire Korean population. In place of loyalty to the king and attachments to the village, clan, and family, and in place of hierarchic status distinctions among *yangban*, commoners, and base people, nationalist historiography endeavored to redirect the people's loyalty toward a new, all-embracing identity of Koreans as a unique ethnic group. It was with this political intent, then, that Sin Ch'aeho wrote "Toksa sillon," for an emerging "general public," tracing Korea's ethnic and cultural origins as far back as possible to a geographic area that extends far beyond the Korean peninsula into Manchuria.

In 1908, Sin Ch'aeho's indictment of Kim Pusik's *Samguk sagi* for the deletion of Manchuria from Korean history and his reconceptualization of state history (*kuksa*) as the history of the Korean nation (*minjoksa*) were radical conceptual acts.³⁰ Sin Ch'aeho's identification of the *minjok* as the subject of an evolutionary History marks a watershed in modern Korean intellectual history.³¹ Through a reading of Sin Ch'aeho's writings, I hope to create an interpretive framework for understanding the historical emergence of nationalist historiography in Korea.

In creating this interpretive framework, I sometimes side with those who condemn nationalism and nationalist historiography and at other times side with those who defend nationalism and nationalist historiography in postcolonial societies such as Korea. To put it simply,

some see nationalism as a rational attempt by the weak and poor peoples of the world to achieve autonomy and liberty, whereas others see nationalism as "one of Europe's most pernicious exports," whose inevitable consequence has been the annihilation of freedom. In contrast, I argue that, as in other nationalist movements, Korean nationalism embodies both democratic (liberating) and oppressive tendencies, and these tendencies manifest themselves most directly in the writing of nationalist historiography in Korea. Focusing on the historiography of Sin Ch'aeho, I show how nationalist historiography resisted the degrading assertions of Japanese colonialist historiography and helped to create a modern form of civil society in Korea. At the same time, I explain how this nationalist historiography has inhibited the deepening of democracy by suppressing heterogeneity and discontinuity in Korean history.

"Toksa sillon" (1908)

Because of space limitations and the existence of superb studies of Sin Ch'aeho, here I do not attempt an exhaustive interpretation of his historiography.³² Instead, I present interpretive readings of selected passages in "Toksa sillon" and later works such as *Chosŏn sanggosa* (History of ancient Korea) and the political manifesto "Chosŏn hyŏngmyŏng sŏnŏn" (Declaration of the Korean revolution). "Toksa Sillon" begins:

[Para. 1] The history of a state is that which renders a precise record of the rise and/or fall, prosperity and/or decay of the *minjok*. Without the *minjok*, there is no history; without history, the *minjok* cannot have a clear perception of the state—and thus, the historian has a heavy responsibility. . . .

[Para. 3] A state is an organic entity formed from the national spirit (*minjok chŏngsin*). That is to say, even in a state formed by various tribal groups (*chongjok*), not to mention a state formed by one tribe with a single blood line, there is always a special tribal group that assumes the primary role. . . .

[Para. 4] Examining history books used at different schools, I've found hardly any of value. In the first chapter, Koreans (*minjok*) are described as if they were part of the Chinese people; in the second chapter, Koreans appear almost like part of the Hsien-pi (Sŏnbijok); and reading the entire book Koreans are variously made out to be part of the Moho (Malgajok), part of the Mongols (Monjojok), part of the Jurchen (Yŏjinjok), or part of the Japanese (Ilbonjok). If this were true, our lands, which encompass several tens of thousands *li*, would be in pandemonium, with barbarians from north and south milling around, and [our] accomplishments of four thousand years would be credited to the Liang in the morning and in the evening to the Ch'u.³³

[Para. 5] Incomplete as our ancient history may be, if we examine it carefully, we can clearly discern the true likeness of those who constitute the primary ethnic composition of our country—the descendants of Tan'gun. That being so, what is the reason for the confusion over who our ancestors are? As we try to dispel the ignorance of the entire citizenry through nationalism (*minjokchu'ui*) and train the minds of our youth with concepts of state so that they may guard our country's last remaining pulse, history is an indispensable instrument. But bad histories are worse than no history.³⁴

The textbooks referred to by Sin Ch'aeho were published by the Bureau of History (P'yönsaguk: established in 1894 under the aegis of the Japanese minister to Korea). Although these books listed Kim T'aegyöng, Hyön Ch'ae, and others as authors, many of them were translations of history books on Korea written by Japanese scholars.³⁵ In criticizing these textbooks, Sin Ch'aeho (1) identified the history of Korea with the fortunes of the *minjok* as constituted by the descendants of Tan'gun; (2) gave the geographic size of Korea as about ten times the customary 3,000 square li, thus appropriating nearly all of Manchuria; (3) took great pains to assert a distinct, separate ethnicity for the Korean people, tracing a precise, singular genealogical history beginning with Tan'gun through Old Chosön-Puyö-Koguryö-Parhae-Koryö-Chosön; and (4) characterized, without equivocation, history as an instrument or a vehicle for instilling patriotism among youth.

Sin Ch'aeho's identification of a country's history with the history of the people (*minjok*) parallels the revolutionary shift that occurred with the French Revolution, the shift from *L'état c'est moi* to *L'état c'est le peuple*. The opening sentence of "Toksa sillon" reflects the republican ideal held by Sin Ch'aeho and many other leading nationalist intellectuals of that time. Later in this text, Sin Ch'aeho stated, "A state does not belong to one individual, it belongs to the entire people."³⁶ As a tactical matter, however, Sin Ch'aeho did not attack the Korean monarch.³⁷ Nevertheless, the nationalist position staked out in "Toksa sillon" gives evidence of what Kang Man'gil has described as the shift from patriotism based on loyalty to the king to a nationalism based on popular sovereignty.³⁸ This *democratic* predisposition became much more manifest in Sin Ch'aeho's later writing (see the discussion below of the *minjok* in relation to the *minjung*).

As Andre Schmid has pointed out, when Sin Ch'aeho asserted a distinct, separate ethnicity for the Korean people that originated with Tan'gun and descended through Puyö, his aim was to subvert weak

and limited conceptions of Korea's national space.³⁹ Schmid notes that confrontations over territorial access – such as resource concessions to foreign powers, circulation of foreign currencies, extraterritoriality, unregulated Japanese immigration – had already undermined inherited conceptions of territorial authority. Sin Ch'aeho's "Toksa sillon" "became the first in a long line of Korean history writing that wielded the Manchurian connection to create a nationalist history that reveled in the grandeur of an ancient past."⁴⁰

In thus problematizing orthodox conceptions of Korea's national space, Sin Ch'aeho drew on irredentist themes from earlier historiography.⁴¹ It is also important to note that, two decades prior to Sin Ch'aeho's "Toksa sillon," Japanese historians had begun to question the "limited" conception of Japan's national space. In an article published in 1889, Kume criticized the notion of "Japan as an island nation that had not changed in thousands of years," and he reminded his readers of an ancient Japan that had encompassed Korea and southeastern China. Eventually, as Stefan Tanaka notes, "arguments like Kume's [served] as a historical justification for the annexation of Korea."⁴² The spatial imagining of a greater Japan and Sin Ch'aeho's greater Korea shared a similar strategy, but their political aims were diametrically opposed – Kume was creating a historical framework for Japanese colonialism, and Sin a historical framework for Korean resistance.

With this defensive motivation, then, Sin Ch'aeho identified the Korean *minjok* as the descendants of Tan'gun and privileged the northern line of descent over the southern one, thus making Manchuria the birthplace of the *minjok* and a powerful reminder of Korea's past glory. Although Sin Ch'aeho's appropriation of Manchuria can be seen as a defensive response, this historical narrative also sustained and duplicated a potent totalizing tendency.⁴³ Below, I elaborate on these issues in my discussion of *minjok* as a totalizing discourse, but first we need to examine more closely what Sin Ch'aeho was reacting against.

Colonialist Historiography

Colonialist historiography, written mostly by Japanese historians but also by a number of Korean historians, provided justification for Japanese control over Korea by narrating Korean history in terms of "lack" – for example, Koreans lacked the capacity for autonomous development, or Koreans lacked a progressive spirit. Colonialist historiography suggested (and at times stated unequivocally) that

because of such inherent deficiencies Japan had no choice but to lead Korea into the modern world. Present-day South Korean historians identify four characteristics of colonialist historiography: *t'ayulsŏng-ron*, external forces (Chinese, Manchurian, and Japanese) had determined Korea's historical development; *chŏngch'esŏng-ron*, Korean history was stagnant (the late Chosŏn had not even reached the feudal stage of development); *tangp'asŏng-ron*, factionalism is deeply ingrained into the Korean political culture (as evidenced by successive literati purges and factional strife during Chosŏn); and *ilsŏn tongjo-ron*, Japanese and Koreans shared common ethnic origins, and thus Japan's colonization of Korea represented the restoration of ancient ties.⁴⁴

According to Hatada Takashi, the origins of what many contemporary Korean historians characterize as colonialist historiography can be traced to mid-Meiji efforts to write a national history for Japan.⁴⁵ One influential work was *Kokushi gan* (A survey of Japanese history), published by Tokyo Imperial University in 1890. Written by Shigeno Yasutsugu, Kume Kunitake, and Hoshino Hisashi, *Kokushi gan* was intended as a pointer in the teaching of Japanese history, and it was long used as a university textbook. According to Numata Jirō, Shigeno played the leading role in establishing the "modern Tokyo tradition" of history writing. Stressing the native origins of "mainstream" historiography in modern Japan, Numata argues that the Tokyo tradition resulted from a fusion between the critical methods of Western historical science (as introduced by the German historian Ludwig Riess starting in 1887) and the scholastic tradition of evidential research, or *kōshō-gaku* (*kochŭnghak* in Korean, *k'ao-cheng* in Chinese), which had been well established during the Tokugawa period.⁴⁶

The narrative framework for Japan's national history was also greatly influenced by the Tokugawa nativist (*kokugaku*) views on Japan's origins. According to Hatada, *Kokushi gan* drew on the nativist reading of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, which asserted that Japanese and Koreans had a common ancestry (*Nissen dōso-ron*): in the sense that Susano-o (the Impetuous-Male-Deity, or the Storm God) had ruled Korea before settling in Izumo (in western Honshu); Inapī no mikoto (brother of Jinmu, the mythical first emperor of Japan) had become king of Silla; his son Ama no hi hoko had returned to Japan in submission; and Empress Jingu (Jingū kōgō) had led a punitive expedition against Silla, forcing its king into submission.⁴⁷ Ko-

kushi gan, as intended, provided the narrative framework for the national history textbooks used in primary and secondary schools in Japan. This, along with media portrayals of Korea following Japan's victory in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), created a historical imaginary (*rekishi zō*) whereby the Japanese came to believe that Japan had ruled Korea in ancient times, and the Japanese colonization of Korea in modern times represented the restoration of an ancient relationship.⁴⁸

This nationalist imaginary in Japan's national histories was reproduced in histories of Korea. Hayashi Taisuke's *Chōsenshi* (History of Korea), published in 1892, argued that in ancient times the northern part of Korea had been a colony of China (the Four Chinese Commanderies of Lo-lang, Chen-fan, Lin-t'un and Hsüan-t'u: 108 B.C.E.–313 C.E.), and the southern part of Korea had been controlled by Mimana (Kaya), a Japanese colony. Hayashi's *Chōsenshi* set the framework for other studies on Korea that sought to explain Korea's historical development as having been determined by external forces. Hyōn Ch'ae's *Tongguk saryak* (1906), which was used as a Korean history textbook in the newly established public schools, was pretty much a translation of Hayashi's *Chōsenshi*. But what truly scandalized Sin Ch'aeho was that Hyōn Ch'ae did not know what he had done wrong—both in terms of historical scholarship and in the political sense.⁴⁹ To cite one more example, Fukuda Tokuzō's *Kankoku no keizai soshiki to keizai tani* (Economic units and economic organization in Korea), published in 1904, asserted that the most salient characteristic of Korean history was its stagnancy, itself a reflection of Korea's failure to have a feudal period. Thus, Fukuda found late-nineteenth-century Chosŏn comparable to tenth-century Japan (Fujiwara period).⁵⁰

These studies of Korea in turn set the tone for other studies on the Orient. Stefan Tanaka has shown how late-nineteenth-century Japanese historians created the category of Tōyōshi (Oriental history) so as to narrate Japanese history as different but equal to European history. One strategy used by Tokugawa intellectuals to deal with the prevailing China-centered East Asian world order and to assert Japan's equivalence with China had been to replace "Chūgoku" (Middle Kingdom) with "Shina" as the Japanese appellation for China. This term allowed nativist (*kokugaku*) scholars to separate Japan from the barbarian/civilized or outer/inner implications of the term "Chūgoku."⁵¹ However, after Japan's victory in the first Sino-Japanese War, historians such

as Shiratori Kurakichi employed the term “Shina” to signify China “as a troubled place mired in its past, in contrast to Japan, a modern Asian nation.”⁵² The symbolic shift in names for China had its counterpart in Korea as well. Sin Ch’aeho’s use of “China” rather than “Chungguk” reflects what Andre Schmid has called the “decentering of the Middle Kingdom.” After Japan’s victory in the first Sino-Japanese War, this decentering reversed inherited notions of “civilization” and shifted the locus away from China and toward Japan and the West. This point is illustrated by a revealing editorial in the *Tongnip sinmun*, the organ of the Independence Club, uncovered by Schmid:

The only thing [we Koreans] knew was to revere China as the central plain (*chongwŏn*), scorn Japan as the country of *wae*, and call all other countries barbarians (*orangk’ae*). Now, for more than ten years, our doors have been open, and we have welcomed guests coming from all places. With our ears we can hear, and with our eyes we can see the customs and laws of western countries. We can now generally judge which countries are the civilized ones and which countries are the barbarous ones.⁵³

In Japanese historiography, the substitution of “Shina” for “Chūgoku” and the creations of a new spatial category called Tōyō (the Orient) and a new academic discipline called Tōyōshi (Oriental history) marked the emergence of a comprehensive ideological system regarding Japan’s position and destiny vis-à-vis the West and the rest of Asia.⁵⁴ Behind the creation of Tōyōshi was the political desire to portray the Japanese as uniquely capable (among non-white peoples) of meeting the European nations on an equal plane and thus uniquely capable of leading Asia. Tōyōshi enabled Japanese intellectuals to conceptualize the West as “merely another culture (though in some aspects still a superior one), a fellow competitor on [the] rocky path toward progress.”⁵⁵ The creation of Tōyōshi, then, was motivated by defensive considerations in that it sought to deflect notions of permanent Western superiority. At the same time, Tōyōshi had its aggressive side. In the hands of Japan’s Orientalists, China and Korea came to embody all the negative aspects of the West’s Orient.

As argued by Tanaka, “modern” Japanese historiography emerged as a response to the Orientalism of the West—that is, as an attempt to de-objectify Japan and Asia. The strategy adopted by historians like Shiratori (and institutions like the Department of Oriental History at Tokyo Imperial University) was to prove that the Japanese were not “Oriental,” as defined by the West, by using the *same* [Orientalist]

epistemology.⁵⁶ As a new academic field, Tōyōshi legitimated itself on the basis of its “scientific,” “rationalistic” methodology, and on the basis of its practical application in the “administration of southern Manchuria” and the “protection and development of Korea.”

For historians like Sin Ch'aeho, the violence of imperialism (and colonialist historiography) was justification enough for writing a nationalist historiography. Sin Ch'aeho's historiography came to set the themes for much of later nationalist historiography, which insisted that Korea has always had a distinct culture and society, testified to the veracity of the Korean nation by chronicling the long history of the Korean people's resistance to foreign aggression, and narrated the emergence of the Korean nation as an essential part of world history.

At the same time, we can detect in Sin Ch'aeho's adoption of categories like China (Shina) and Tongyangsa (Tōyōshi), a paradox inherent to nationalist discourse in the colonial world: the subjugated people, in the very act of resisting colonial rule, speak the language of their oppressors—the language of competition, democracy, and progress. The problematic in nationalist thought forces it relentlessly to demarcate itself from the discourse of colonialism, but even as nationalist discourse seeks to assert the feasibility of entirely new political possibilities, it remains a prisoner of the modes of thought characteristic of rational knowledge in the post-Enlightenment age—thus the lack of autonomy of nationalist discourse.⁵⁷

Minjok as a Totalizing Discourse

If, however, *minjok* is a twentieth-century construct, and a derivative discourse at that, how was it that Korean nationalism (*minjokchuŭi*) became such a powerful mobilizing force? Although acknowledging the power (and achievements) of the Korean nationalist movement, we should be on guard against the appropriating and totalizing power of nationalist historiography. As Elie Kedourie cautions, not being wary of nationalist categories in historiography can result in deception: “Men who thought they were acting in order to accomplish the will of God, to make the truth prevail, or to advance the interests of a dynasty, or perhaps simply to defend their own against aggression, are suddenly seen to have been really acting in order that the genius of a particular nationality should be manifested and fostered.”⁵⁸ Or, as argued more recently by Prasenjit Duara, while in reality the “nation” is a contested and contingent identity, national

(as well as nationalist) historiography secures for the nation "the false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time."⁵⁹ Kedourie's and Duara's critiques of national historiography are pertinent to the Korean case.

With easy confidence, contemporary Korean national historiography (*minjok sahak*) secures for the nation a long list of "national" heroes from as early as the Three Kingdoms period, military heroes like Ŭlchi Mundŏk (mid-sixth century–early seventh century) of Koguryŏ. But, as John Duncan points out, it is "extremely unlikely that the peoples of Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla all thought of themselves as members of a larger, 'Korean' collectivity that transcended local boundaries and state loyalties."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, on the basis of certain assumptions made about blood and soil, national (and nationalist) historiography endows these military heroes with a common "national" identity. As explained by Etienne Balibar, this national identity "is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to [this entity] the continuity of a subject. The formation of the nation thus appears as the fulfillment of a 'project' stretching over centuries, in which there are different stages and moments of coming to self-awareness."⁶¹ Through the power of this ideological form, national histories can portray even Paleolithic inhabitants of the peninsula as "early Koreans," their culture as "pre-national," and the modern Korean nation-state as the culmination of a long process of development.⁶² But, as Etienne Balibar reminds us, we should not read this history as "a line of necessary evolution but [as] a series of conjunctural relations which has inscribed them after the event into the pre-history of the nation-form."⁶³

Even as some historians acknowledge the discontinuities and breaks in Korean history, nearly all still accept the nation-state as the "normal" or "natural" form of political community.⁶⁴ This, Prasenjit Duara argues, is a central facet of Western hegemony: the assumption that the nation-state is the only legitimate form of polity.⁶⁵ We are as yet unable to imagine alternative political forms, and by writing narratives of the nation, which constitute much of modern historiography, historians help maintain the illusion of a nation's necessary and unilinear evolution. The nation form, as ideology, presents itself to us as ontological necessity—our desire that history will confirm our belief that the present rests on profound intentions and necessities prompts the production of a linear, continuous history that begins in the Paleolithic period and culminates in the establishment of (depending on one's politics) the

Republic of Korea (South) or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).⁶⁶

It remains for a democratic historiography, then, to show how the nation threatens to impose immutable articulations in an authoritarian way. And strange as it may sound, the basis for a much less totalizing historiography may, I think, be found in Sin Ch'aeho's later historiography and certainly in his anarchist writings. But first, we need to look more closely at the relationship between colonialism and nationalism.

Colonialism and Nationalism

The proliferation of discourses on Korean identity, which emanated from both the Korean nationalist movement and the Japanese colonial state, stemmed from the *necessity* to "nationalize." For both Koreans and Japanese, the necessity of producing Korean subjects was prompted by the development of the global nation-state system.⁶⁷ In the process of trying to compete, or simply survive, in the nation-state system, *both* the colonial state and the Korean nationalist movements and organizations had to study, standardize, and thus re-invent (or just invent) everything we now associate with the Korean nation, including such "essential" elements as the Korean language and Korean ethnicity.⁶⁸

In terms of language, it was only in 1894 that the syllabary created by King Sejong in 1446 acquired the status of "national script" (*kungmun*). Had it not been for the Tonghak uprising in the countryside and the "reform" cabinet installed by the Japanese military (1894–96), it would have taken much longer for the Korean syllabary to overturn the privileged status of literary Chinese. Until the very end of the nineteenth century, the *yangban* opposed the use of the syllabary (*hunmin chŏngŭm*: instructing the people on the correct sounds) on epistemological grounds—that is, they considered *hunmin chŏngŭm* (or *ŏnmun* as it was disparagingly called) a vulgar script, and they felt popular use of this syllabary would mean turning away from a whole universe of knowledge.

What is interesting, however, is that, when *ŏnmun* was raised to the status of the "national script" in 1894, and the spoken vernacular became the "national language" (*kugŏ*), the rationale given for dropping literary Chinese was that it was *Chinese*. After annexation in 1910, of course, the national script and the national language became

kokugo and *kokubun*—Japanese. To avoid confusion, Korean nationalists later changed the appellation for the Korean vernacular writing system to *han'gŭl* to distinguish it from Japanese script (*kokubun*; *kungmun* in Korea).⁶⁹ The esteem suddenly accorded *ŏnmun* in the late nineteenth century gives evidence of a certain “racialization of knowledge” which followed the breakdown of the China-centered East Asian order.

As Yi Kimun notes, without a revolution it would have been impossible for *ŏnmun* (*han'gŭl*) to overturn the privileged status of literary Chinese. The revolution came in the form of a royal edict in 1894 which decreed that all laws and edicts be published in the national script (that is, in the *han'gŭl* syllabary), with Chinese appended for clarification. (The edict also allowed the “occasional” use of mixed script: *han'gŭl* along with Chinese ideographs.)⁷⁰ Outside the official realm, newspapers and books were being published in the vernacular. As Benedict Anderson argues, the use of the vernacular in writing (imparting dignity to spoken speech) and the emergence of print capitalism created the institutional base that made imagining the “nation” possible. The royal edict of 1894 and the proliferation and dissemination of vernacular newspapers like the *Tongnip sinmun* enabled the production of that “homogenous time” and “homogenous space” within which one could imagine the simultaneous existence of fellow Koreans inhabiting a shared geographic space bounded by distinct borders.⁷¹

The revolution that allowed *han'gŭl* to overturn the privileged status of literary Chinese drew its energy from the various centrifugal movements within Korea that were undermining the authority of the Yi dynasty.⁷² This particular revolution also had foreign sponsorship. The edict was announced as part of a larger “reform” effort under the auspices of the Japanese forces in Korea.⁷³ Imperialist rivalry over Korea and eventual colonization by Japan intervened in the nation-building process, and the process of nationalizing Koreans was assumed by the Japanese colonial state.

It was the Japanese colonial state that went on to establish controls over print capitalism as well as national systems of schooling, transportation, and communication.⁷⁴ Compelled to deny any “constructive” role to Japanese colonialism, contemporary Korean nationalist accounts draw attention to the last decade of the colonial period when the colonial authorities, under the banner of *naisen ittai* (Japan and Korea as a single body), pursued a policy of forced assimilation: eliminating the use of Korean in school instruction (1934), requiring attendance at

Shinto ceremonies (1935), and mandating the adoption of Japanese surnames (1939). The slogan of *naisen ittai*, however, reveals the ambivalence of Japan's racist policy throughout the colonial period, the ambivalence marked by the combination of exteriorization and internal exclusion. Japan, as the interior (*nai*), excludes Korea (*sen*) as the "outside"; at the same time, this outside (Korea) must become one with the interior, which is always already there.⁷⁵ It was in this sense that Japanese colonialism was "constructive" for both the colonizer and colonized: the construction of Japanese superiority as demonstrated by the inferiority of Koreans, and the superiority claimed by the colonizer generating a self-image of inferiority among Koreans.

Coercion, prohibition, and censorship, then, were not the only (or even primary) forms through which colonial power was exercised. The Japanese colonial state did establish new rules and controls over the enunciation of Korean national identity. Areas, if not of utter silence, at least of tact and discretion, were established—for example, in newspaper editorials and the school curriculum. At the same time, there was a steady proliferation of discourses concerning Korean identity emanating from the Japanese colonial state itself—including studies of Korean history, geography, language, customs, religion, music, art—in almost immeasurable accumulated detail. What are we to make of this?

For the Japanese colonial state, the goal of exploiting Korea and using it for its strategic ends went hand in hand with the work of transforming peasants into Koreans, or "Chōsenjin." In other words, the logic of its racist colonial policy compelled the Japanese colonial state to reconstitute (disparate) Korean identities into a homogenous "Chōsenjin." Thereafter, "Chōsenjin" became both a bureaucratic and derogatory classification that applied to all Koreans regardless of gender, regional origin, or class background.

Thus, contrary to conventional nationalist accounts that argue that Japanese colonial authorities pursued a consistent and systematic policy of eradicating Korean identity, we should see that the Japanese colonial state actually endeavored to produce Koreans as subjects—subjects in the sense of being under the authority of the Japanese emperor, and in the sense of having a separate (and inferior) subjectivity. This, in turn, led to a bifurcated national (and racial) discourse, because Korean nationalist historians, in competition with the Japanese colonial state, were engaged in the project of recovering/producing an autonomous Korean subjectivity. Nationalist historians would find evidence of this subjectivity in history, but in necessarily incomplete or disfigured form:

only political independence could render possible the full realization of true Korean subjectivity.

Thus we have both the Japanese colonial state and revolutionary Korean nationalists researching and writing Korean history, preserving and interpreting Korean customs and religious practices, and laboring to create a standard Korean language. Although the power of the repressive and ideological apparatuses of the Japanese colonial state far surpassed that of the Korean nationalist movement, the contradictions inherent in Japan's racist colonial policy, along with the capacity of the Korean nationalist movement to (re)generate discourses of identity and liberation, ensured that the discourse on nation remained a contested field throughout the colonial period.⁷⁶ Thus, *any* "Korean" subjectivity created under such conditions—whether loyal to the Japanese empire or defiant of it—had to be profoundly unstable and constantly threatened by the contradictions of colonial experience.⁷⁷

The Nation-State System

In analyzing discourses that are hegemonic on a global scale, such as the nation form, we must consider non-discursive macro-processes, processes that have to do with the capitalist world-economy, or what Wallerstein has called the "World System." According to Wallerstein, hegemony in the World System has to do with "productive, commercial and financial preeminence of one core power over other core powers," a pre-eminence that is not enduring because there is both upward and downward mobility in core-periphery relations.⁷⁸ The nation-state system emerged as the political superstructure of this World System. The interstate system is competitive because nation-states in the periphery may succeed in attaining core status, and core nations can slip to semi-periphery status.⁷⁹

Bruce Cumings makes use of World Systems theory to argue that for most of the twentieth century (with the exception of the seven months from Pearl Harbor to the battle of Midway), Japan has been a subordinate part of either a trilateral American-British hegemony or a bilateral American hegemony.⁸⁰ In other words, even as it ruled Korea, Japan was a sub-imperial power—that is, a "core" power vis-à-vis Korea and China but a dependency of Britain and the United States in both the regime of technology and in world politics. Cumings illustrates this by citing the example of Japanese textile firms, the leading sector in Japan's first phase of industrialization, which bought their machines from

England until about 1930. In the 1930s Japan began producing better machines and quickly became the most efficient textile producer in the world. In the mining industry, however, Japan was still dependent on American technology throughout the 1930s, allowing American gold-mining companies to profit from Korean gold mines. In sum, according to Cumings, Japan's position in the world-system changed according to the following timeline:

- 1900–22: Japan in British-American hegemony
- 1922–41: Japan in American-British hegemony
- 1941–45: Japan as regional hegemon in East Asia
- 1945–70: Japan in American hegemony⁸¹

Cumings is not proposing a reduction of national narratives to some abstract capitalist relations of production. Rather, along lines suggested by Etienne Balibar, Cumings's approach to understanding national narratives might be described as "bound up not with the abstraction of the capitalist market, but its concrete historical form: that of a 'world-economy' which is always already hierarchically organized into a 'core' and a 'periphery,' each of which have different methods of accumulation and exploitation of labor power, and between which relations of unequal exchange and domination are established."⁸² In other words, as Etienne Balibar explains, it is "the concrete configurations of the class struggle and not 'pure' economic logic which explain the constitution of nation states."⁸³

On the relationship between discourses on ethnic identity and the logic of the World System, Wallerstein notes that the capitalist system is based not merely on the capital-labor antinomy but on a complex hierarchy within the labor segment. This hierarchy within labor generates the "ethnicization" of the workforce within a given state's boundaries. There are certain advantages to the ethnicization of occupational categories—because different kinds of relations of production require different kinds of "normal" behavior. The advantages have to do with the fact that the state need not do all the work—the oppressed group will *voluntarily* defend its ethnic identity and socialize its membership. This resolves "one of the basic contradictions of historical capitalism—its simultaneous thrust for theoretical equality, and practical inequality."⁸⁴

The concrete, historical form of this World System—which is always hierarchically organized into a core and periphery—provided the framework for the hegemony of the nation-state system. The ability of

historians such as Shiratori to define, limit, and authorize a certain view of the rest of the Orient and then impose it was made possible by an emerging industrial mode of production in Japan whose success was verified in Japan's victories over China (1895) and Russia (1905). And yet, Japan's version of Orientalism could not achieve full hegemonic status in the sense that even as Japan colonized Korea, established a puppet state in Manchuria, and controlled parts of North China, Japan remained a dependency of Britain and the United States. Thus, we might say that there were overlapping and competing "hegemonies" operating in Korea, producing competing discourses on race, nation, gender, modernity, and culture. Moreover, these hegemonies dissipated as one moved from the core (London, Washington, Tokyo) to the major intellectual centers in the periphery (Beijing, Shanghai). From the periphery, intellectuals like Sin Ch'aeho succeeded in subverting and/or displacing the dominant framework in important ways.⁸⁵

Minjok and Minjung

In Sin Ch'aeho's anarchist writings (1925 on), the all-embracing identity of *minjok* is replaced by the more partisan category of *minjung*. In historical studies written in the 1910s and early 1920s, Sin had begun to present a less essentialist way of conceptualizing the nation. Perhaps as a self-critique of his earlier position in "Toksa sillon," Sin Ch'aeho's "Introduction" to the *Chosŏn sanggosa* (hereafter CS) has moments of ambivalence in signifying the *minjok*, moments of slippage in the opposition of self/Other. But before we examine the text itself, it is relevant to note how and why CS came to be published in Korea in 1931, about a decade after it was written.

In 1931, the general crisis in the world economic system had pushed the Soviet Union toward a policy of "socialism in one country," the United States toward the New Deal, and Europe and Japan toward fascism (which presented itself as an alternative to the problems of a market economy). In 1931, the Sin'ganhoe voted to dissolve itself—acknowledging its failure to create an effective united front linking Korean Communists, nationalists, and anarchists within Korea. That same year Japanese forces invaded Manchuria, and Korea began to be transformed into an economic and military base for Japanese penetration of the Chinese mainland. On the intellectual scene, the Chōsenshi henshūkai (Society for the compilation of Korean history; hereafter SCKH), whose work was directed and funded by the office of the governor-general in Korea, was about to begin publication of its mas-

sive, detailed study of Korean history – the outcome of a project begun by Governor-General Saitō Makoto in 1922.⁸⁶

It was at this historical juncture that Sin Ch'aeho's CS was serialized in Korea in the *Chosŏn ilbo*.⁸⁷ The day after publication of CS ended, the *Chosŏn ilbo* began running Sin's *Chosŏn sanggo munhwasa* (Cultural history of ancient Korea; hereafter CSM), in 40 installments. An Chaehong (1891–1965), a historian in his own right and the president of the *Chosŏn ilbo*, was instrumental in publishing Sin Ch'aeho's work inside Korea.⁸⁸ Because Sin Ch'aeho had not compromised with the Japanese—at the time Sin was incarcerated in a Japanese prison in Lüshun (Port Arthur)—and because the work itself had been written (geographically and intellectually) outside the perimeter of Japan's hegemony, Sin Ch'aeho's historiography was presented as a much needed corrective to colonialist historiography's distortions of Korea's ancient past.

But in “writing from the periphery,” Sin Ch'aeho succeeded in subverting not only colonialist historiography but many of the assumptions associated with the nation form. Ironically, this counter-hegemonic move was made possible through Sin Ch'aeho's appropriation of Hegel's subject-object distinction. It is worth quoting at length from Sin's introduction to CS.

What is history? It is the record of the state of mental activity in human society wherein the struggle between the “I” (*a*) and the “non-I” (*pi-a*) develops through time and expands through space. World history, then, is a record of such a state for all of mankind, whereas Korean history is a record of such a state for the Korean people (*Chosŏn minjok*).

Who do we refer to as “I” and the “non-I”? Simply put, we call the person situated in the subjective position “I,” and all others we call “non-I.” For example, Koreans call Korea “I” and call England, America, France, Russia, and others the “non-I.” But the people of England, America, France, Russia, and other countries call their countries “I” and call Korea a “non-I.” The proletariat refers to itself as “I” and to landlords, capitalists, and others as the “non-I.” But the landlords, capitalists, and others refer to their own group as “I” and to the proletariat as the “non-I.” Not only this but in learning, in technology, in occupations, and in the intellectual world—and in every other area—if there is an I there will be a non-I as its opposite; and just as there is an I and the non-I within the I position, so there is an I and the non-I within the non-I position. Therefore, the more frequent the contact between I and the non-I, the more heated will be the struggle of the I against the non-I. And so there is no respite in the activity of human society, and there will never be a day when the forward advance of history will be completed. It is for this reason that history is the record of struggle between I and the non-I. . . .

[Para. 7] If the people of Myo, China, etc.—the non-I—constituting the other (*sangdaeja*) had not existed, it is unlikely that “I” would have existed. That is, naming the state as Chosŏn, building the three capitals, keeping the five armies, etc.—this manifestation of the “I” would not have occurred.⁸⁹

Here, in reference to “China” (Shina in Japanese), we might detect the presence of Japanese Orientalism. But although Sin Ch’aeho may have used “China” rather than “Chungguk” to distance Korea from the barbarian/civilized, outer/inner implications of China as the Middle Kingdom, Sin Ch’aeho’s use of China in CS did not (indeed could not) invoke the kind of Orientalist assumptions present in Shiratori’s historiography. The national subject (Korean, English, or French) is historically constructed,⁹⁰ and it lacks essential unity: national identity may have been constructed in opposition to a foreign other, but it is also (necessarily) fragmented from within. Thus, we find the subject-object distinction made by Hegel, but it is clear that the philosophical structure “which uncannily simulates the project of nineteenth-century imperialism,” as Robert Young puts it, has been taken over, made “universal” from the point of view of the colonized.⁹¹

Immersed in the intellectual ferment of Shanghai and Beijing (especially in the wake of the May Fourth movement), Sin was able to appropriate Hegel’s dialectic in a way that produced not a chauvinist historiography (based on the triumphant, rational subject), but a contingent and open-ended one. Even if we did not know that Sin Ch’aeho became an anarchist after writing these histories, the texts themselves suggest moments of ambivalence in signifying the *minjok*: that is, moments of slippage in the opposition of self/Other.⁹² “If there is an I there will be a non-I as its opposite; and just as there is an I and the non-I within the I position, so there is an I and the non-I within the non-I position.”⁹³

In his later anarchist writings, Sin tried to construct a new collective subjectivity capable of subverting the modernist program, which he saw as oppressive, exploitative, and brutal. The nation form as imagined by the West was hegemonic—hegemonic in the sense that the global nation-state system set the boundaries of political discourse, defining the nation-state as the “normal” or “natural” form of political community. And yet, no construct can be completely or permanently hegemonic, and hegemony dissipated as one moved from the core to the periphery. From the periphery, then, intellectuals like Sin Ch’aeho succeeded in subverting and/or displacing the dominant framework in important ways.

Nationalist readings of Sin Ch’aeho focus on the anti-Japanese as-

pects of his writings. In the “Chosŏn hyŏngmyŏng sŏnŏn” (1923), Sin Ch’aeho did list “bandit Japan” (*kangdo Ilbon*) as the primary target of the revolution, understood as the Japanese emperor, the governor-general of Korea and other high officials, “traitorous politicians,” and any and all facilities belonging to the enemy. By smashing Japan, Koreans could recover an “indigenous Korea” (*koyu ŭi Chosŏn*), which lay beneath Japan’s despotism. (Korea and Japan are in brackets in the original). But the recovery of an indigenous Korea did not mean the restoration of old social forms. Along with foreign rule, “slavish culture and servile mentality” were to be destroyed. All religious beliefs, ethics, culture, art, customs, and habits of traditional culture produced by the strong for their enjoyment had to be dismantled so that the people (*minjung*) could break out of their abject fate and construct a people’s culture (*minjungjŏk munhwa*).

Sin Ch’aeho excoriated those Koreans who were lobbying for an “independent domestic administration” (*naejŏng tongnip*), “participatory government” (*ch’am chŏnggwŏn*), or “self-rule” (*chach’i*). They were forgetting how Japan had devoured Korea “even as the ink was drying on [Japanese] slogans that had guaranteed ‘Peace in Asia,’ and the ‘Protection of Korean Independence.’” Sin also ridiculed those nationalists who advocated a “cultural movement” (*munhwa undong*). Writing editorials that would not offend the colonial authorities was all the cultural movement amounted to. For Sin, one hundred million pages of newspapers and magazines could not equal the power of one uprising in awakening the *minjung*.

Sin also denounced those nationalists who advocated “diplomacy” (*oegyoron*) or “preparation” (*chunbiron*). He did not name specific individuals, but it would have been clear to his readers that the targets of Sin’s polemics were Syngman Rhee and An Ch’angho. Syngman Rhee was “stupid” (*ŏlisŏkgo yongryŏl hada*) for banking on foreign intervention to solve the problem of national survival. As for An Ch’angho and others who argued for “preparation,” Sin Ch’aeho reminded them that they should be preparing for a war of independence. Arguing that Koreans must ready themselves for independence, the advocates of *chunbiron* actually advocated political quietism, turning their energies to education, industry, and a whole list of things that had to be “prepared.” These activists made the rounds in Beijing, Siberia, Hawaii, and the United States to collect money for their programs, but all they could show for their efforts were a few precarious schools and inept organizations.⁹⁴

What did Sin Ch'aeho advocate in the 1920s? As Sin Yongha argues, Sin's disgust with nationalists in the Korean Provisional Government, plus his reading of Pyotr Kropotkin, turned Sin from nationalism to anarchism.⁹⁵ Today, most conservative intellectuals in South Korea gloss over the fact that rather than the nation (*minjok*), the historical subject in Sin Ch'aeho's revolution was the people (*minjung*), a broad political grouping of the oppressed and exploited "propertyless masses" (*musan taejung*).⁹⁶ The *minjung*, as Sin Ch'aeho used the term, was a more amorphous category than Marx's proletariat, but it was not synonymous with the Korean people as a whole, that is, *minjok*. As Marx did for the proletariat, Sin Ch'aeho granted ontological privilege to the *minjung*.

Throughout Korean history, argued Sin, the *minjung* had formed the wretched majority—exploited, beaten, starved, lulled into subservience and obedience. For that very reason, the *minjung* was uniquely capable of sweeping away all oppressive and exploitative institutions and practices, and in that sense the *minjung* was a universal subject. But unlike the Marxist-Leninists, Sin Ch'aeho refused to distinguish between the vanguard and the masses, or between leaders and the led, and the revolution was therefore a "*minjung* revolution" or a "direct revolution." The *minjung* formed the "the grand headquarters" of the revolution (*Minjung ūn uri hyŏngmyŏng ūi taebonyŏng ida*). Through a program of assassinations, bombings, and uprisings, Sin Ch'aeho believed, the "conscientized" segment of the *minjung* could succeed in imparting "resolve" (*kago*) to the *minjung*. When the *minjung* as a whole resolved to take the path of revolution, all the cunning and savagery of the colonial state would not be able to stop the revolution.

Thus, Sin Ch'aeho differentiated between the "awakened" *minjung* and the "not awakened" *minjung*, but this distinction was not at all similar to the kind of external and manipulative relationship that characterized the Leninist conception of relations between the "vanguard" and the "masses." Sin Ch'aeho resisted the Leninist idea that the "for itself" of the revolutionary subject was accessible only to the enlightened vanguard. And indeed, even as he called for a revolution, Sin Ch'aeho's language echoed the moralistic tone of Kropotkin. The exploitative economic system swallows up the people (*minjung*) in order to fatten thieves, but this system of plunder must be destroyed in order to improve the lives of the people. In all societies with inequalities, the strong oppress the weak, the high-born stand above the humble, and the people have to plunder, excoriate, and envy one another. At first the

majority of the people are harmed for the happiness of a few. But later, the privileged few struggle among themselves so that the people are harmed even more. Thus, the happiness of *all* the people can be attained only with the eradication of social inequalities.⁹⁷

In spite of this seemingly immutable commitment to an egalitarian ideal, many conservative intellectuals assume that had Sin Ch'aeho lived to see Korea liberated, he would have abandoned anarchism.⁹⁸ But it was Sin Ch'aeho's assertion that an unfettered people would construct communities based on equality, cooperation, and reason. Although Korea's liberation from colonial rule was a fundamental goal of the revolution, "privileged classes" (*t'ŭkkwŏn kyegŭp*), which oppress the "Korean people" (*chayujŏk Chosŏn minjung*—with *Chosŏn minjung* in brackets in the original text), including the colonial administration, were to be overthrown so as to recover an "unfettered people" (*chayujŏk Chosŏn minjung*). The emergence of an unfettered people, and the communities they would create based on equality, cooperation, and reason, could not be brought about through the power of any nation-state.

Here, then, was a political program that went beyond nationalism, and a historical view that undermined the continuous, unified narrative of the nation. To those who fear the unraveling of this narrative, Sin Ch'aeho might say: "Those who do not know how to build do not know how to destroy, and those who do not know how to destroy do not know how to build. Construction and destruction are different only in appearance. In the mind, destruction is immediately construction."⁹⁹ After the Korean War, state-nationalism as it emerged in both North and South Korea all but overwhelmed and swamped such autonomous forms of imagination. Sin Ch'aeho's turn to anarchism (where the all-embracing identity of *minjok* is replaced by the more partisan category of *minjung*) suggests that *minjok*, by itself, can no longer serve as a democratic imaginary.